

The Diversity Continuum: A Creative Project and Research focused on the Media
Perception of People of Color

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Dedication

My son, your birth set into motion a turn of events that have changed me physically, spiritually and mentally. As I watched you fight so bravely just to breath I knew I would never again be able to give up easily on a task put before me. Though small in stature, your strength inspired me then as it does now to fight for what I want. I thank my Heavenly Father for your vigor, your spirit and your life.

My husband, through let downs and setbacks, through bouts of procrastination and depression, through sleepless nights and groggy mornings you have been my constant companion. Thank you for loving me even through my faults. Thank you for becoming the father I dreamed of for our child. Thank you for your support. Thank you for your courage and empathy. Thank you for providing. Thank you for being my friend.

Dear parents, you see in me what I can't see in myself. If ever a child were loved by parents I know that I am loved by you. Even when I fall short you continue to let me know that I have what it takes to keep going. In these trying times I know that you both often hid your trepidation to protect me from the pain of worry. Though we have suffered loss in wealth through your love and presence in my life I understand that I am richly blessed. I have two parents who love me just because I am me.

This project is dedicated to you all. It marks the end of one journey and the beginning of another. May God light my path as I embark upon what lies ahead.

Abstract

Confessions reflects contemporary African American relationships and conflicts set within a universal storyline. The online production utilizes new media to reach an audience through a dramatic presentation. Keywords used within this document are perception, webisode, Black-themed, White-themed and Black culture. The web address for the creative project is www.confessions55.com.

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The Diversity Continuum: A Creative Project and Research focused on the Media Perception of People of Color

The media directly influences and shapes the attitude or perspective of people around the world. However, younger and multicultural audiences often remain ill informed and under-informed of broadcast ethnic representation. While not yet the number one approach, younger audiences are using emerging media technology as their first choice for entertainment options. Broadcast programming that is attractive to people of color tends to be that which reflects predominantly ethnic group acting. For example, African Americans are most attracted to programs that star African Americans. This concept is supported by ratings for shows such as *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*. "Among African American Adults ages 18 to 34, 18 to 49 and 25-54 House of Payne is the number one show in all of network prime, all of cable and all of syndication" (Albiniak, 2008). The success of *House of Payne* reflects its ability to cross ethnic barriers as demonstrated by its success over ratings monsters such as *Gray's Anatomy*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Desperate House Wives* and *CSI*. Success over these shows is notable because each has attempted to expand its multiethnic viewing base by including characters of multiple ethnic groups. One could safely assume that inclusivity is paramount in the casting of characters for today's media programs. It must also be recognized that this has not always been the case. Early broadcast programming relegated people of color to positions of servitude. Early cable programming seldom

reflected ethnic population, while radio offered very limited inclusions of ethnic-based music. Where possible race music was offered during limited programming hours or only on stations targeting an ethnic market. Until ten years ago, personal computers were not considered media entertainment vehicles. The purpose of this creative project is to promote the use of an emerging media vehicle to offer a programming option that fills the void in an ethnic-based genre for younger thinking media consumers. This project is entitled *Confessions*. It was created by Tuane Hearn and is written and produced by Tonya M. Naylor. *Confessions* examines the experiences of African Americans between the ages of 29-60 years of age. Like African Americans included in broadcast and cable programming, upper-middle class African Americans are portrayed. The image of the church and spirituality is included. The relationship between women and their hair is examined and the gritty day-to-day experiences of African Americans are presented. Unlike its predecessors, it is not a multiethnic drama. It is not a comedy situated in the projects. It is not a documentary based examination of the lives of marginalized African Americans or Black people and as realistic as it is, it is not reality TV. Most importantly, *Confessions* breaks away from the traditions of broadcast programming by giving the audience unlimited options for viewing each episode.

In this paper the history of representations of African Americans in broadcast and cable will be examined. An explanation of why *Confessions* fills the void in Black oriented programming will be discussed. In this section the importance of *Confessions* as a dramatic vehicle is discussed. The method used to produce *Confessions* is discussed. The response to *Confessions* is presented. Finally suggestions on how *Confessions* can be improved and sustained will close the paper.

Definitions

It is important that we share common understandings of words used in this paper. The following terms will be defined: Black-themed, White-themed, Black Culture, Upper Middle class and webisode.

For the purpose of this paper the term *Black-themed* will be used to reflect storylines that utilize stable elements of African American culture as identified by the writer. Such elements include but are not limited to the high context social structure within the African American community, the presence and influence of the Black church and spirituality, Sunday dinner, conspicuous consumption, the role of the female within the Black family as the anchor, importance of the extended family, and the use of Black English. When the term *White-themed* appears it will reflect the low context social structure within the White community, exclusivity, power, majority rule, and Eurocentric thinking. *Black culture* refers to contributions and traditions observed and passed down by African Americans and those of African decent. The term Upper Middle class is used as a social identifier of those who have developed a belief system and lifestyle reflective of behavior of individuals who enjoy a higher economic status. Finally, the term webisode refers to a single episode presented from a website using streaming audio and video or other techniques.

Literature Review

In 2000 the Television Critics Association voiced their astonishment that none of the 26 new prime-time shows being launched by the four major networks during the fall lineup featured a non-white character (Hughes, 2003). However, it was in 2003 when the networks, encouraged by actors of color, began to make a real effort to increase the inclusion of Latinos, Asians and African Americans. While those changes were not immediate, they did slowly reflect not only an increase in the number of characters of color but also the value and contribution of each. In this section we will examine the changes portrayed in the representation of African Americans on American Television.

While African Americans have been seen on television since its inception, they have been portrayed in different ways. From 1948 until 1950, all ethnic groups could be seen on television. Because of the scarcity of stations and the lack of funding to pay them, television stations often broadcast whoever wanted to be on television. The golden years of television were preceded by “The years of Promise” (McDonald). Because these performers were often singers or other musical entertainers, there was support for using them. Few negative portrayals are reflected of that era. From 1950 until the present, broadcasters have struggled with how well or poorly the industry continues to present people of color. Relegated to jobs as domestics and subservient people, African Americans had few options for ways that could be included in the programs. Although African Americans were producing films, almost no television producers were producing or directing African Americans. As a matter of fact, it was illegal to have black actors on

the set with white actors. Behind the scenes, by 1954 the second African American in the country was hired to work in Indiana's WTTV television station's Art Department.

The effort to include more African Americans soon began to die down in the 60's. Television stations became afraid of whether or not to include black actors on the stage with white actors. Surprisingly, the failure to hire many of them eased that problem. In the 1970s, after the death of Martin Luther King and others, stations began to hire African Americans again. The strongest surge came during this decade. Shows like *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *That's My Mama* and *What's Happening* came and stayed for a respectable time. During the 70's producers found a few African American writers but still hired white writers primarily. The few African American writers were there to fill in the cultural components when producers cared about the accuracy of the cultural representation. Characters on these shows were often buffoons who may have gained a few more dollars but never developed class, sophistication or worldly exposure. The 1980's ushered in a combination of education, increase in social status and a return to actors from the 1950s who had been well-received performers. There were more African American producers and writers but many White producers still finding success by continuing to produce cheap productions with buffoonish characters. During the 1990s, networks began to work on the ensemble cast. This was a continuation of successful shows in the very late 1980s that were situated in cities with large ethnic mixes in the city. The shows would then have one of each of the ethnic groups as characters in the production. This approach did not give way to great increases in the numbers or percentages of ethnic groups portrayed but it did show most of the colors on TV. The turn of the century made a significant change in the representation of African Americans.

Protests by ethnic groups caused the change in representations that had been promised by producers since the early days of television. By 2005, changes were apparent in the representations of Latinos and Asians. Southwest Asians were added to the list. The role of Asian men changed from techno-geeks to men capable of caring for children. African Americans gained greater power in the workplace. One became president on *24* and One Latino even became President, as did one Latino on *West Wing*.

Of course, not all the changes were great changes. In 2008 of the 40 nominations handed down by the Television Critics Association only seven (7) nominees portrayed people of color as part of the recurring cast members. Of those seven only one, HBO's "The Wire," was a series drama. Still none of the major networks had a nomination that portrayed people of color in a dramatic on going series. This influential entity does not reflect the cultural heritage and race of the forty percent of American youth ages 19 and under according to Fall Colors: Prime Time Diversity Report of 2003-2004. Another study done by the UCLA Chicano Research Center states that in 2004 of the eight series set in Los Angeles, Latinos accounted for fourteen percent of the regular characters (and appear in just one series) despite the fact that Los Angeles County was forty-five percent Latino. There were no Asian American regular characters even though they accounted for twelve percent of the population within the city where these shows were set to take place. Based upon the study conducted by Allison R. Hoffman and Chon A. Noriega, during that year 40% of all prime time series were comprised of all White recurring characters with eighty percent of all series being designated as "white themed."

According to this trend television does not present a microcosm of society. This type of representation for people of color perpetuates a distorted view of our nations changing demographics. Such disproportionate imagery could be sending a dire message to the next generation of American leaders. This type of portrayal could also lead individuals to believe that some races are more important than others in our melting pot society.

One cannot argue against the fact that the major cities where most American prime time television is set possess a very diverse societal makeup. According to Census information of 2000 provided on the Website of the US Census Bureau, in the state of New York, African Americans account for 15.6 of the population with an estimated 3,635,149 residing within New York City. Why then does television continue not to mimic reality more closely? With this in mind this project will explore minority viewer perception as it relates to the modern African American. Exploration will be done to determine whether viewer choice is a variable in perception. Can African Americans be portrayed in a dramatic storyline and maintain their cultural identity without alienating their non-Black audience? Do minority viewers truly perceive the images depicted on today's most viewed programming as true reflections of their lifestyles, cultural and moral background? Or, does programming continue to center around what White male producers feel White middle-class Americans are able to handle? Can the internet be used as a springboard for programming on prime time television on the major networks? Based upon the research conducted a web-based dramatic production that centers around African Americans will be posted to the web and comments concerning its content will be able to left by anyone who views the footage. This creative project will strive to

create a realistic representation of African American culture and lifestyle while maintaining a universal storyline.

Keeping with the aims of the Digital Storytelling program at Ball State University this creative project will have a well developed script that displays my understanding of storytelling and will creatively portray the tone of an African American based story line to a diverse audience. The website which will host the production will display my understanding of digital convergence while the complete project will exhibit how the challenges of writing, editing, filming and distributing such a project were addressed.

The creative project will consist of a script, website, and digital footage that will be displayed on the website. The character and storyline development that will ultimately become the script will be closely manipulated to reflect a positive yet realistic snapshot of African-American life. The script will display key components of African American culture within a story line that centers on universal social divergences of modern American society. This approach is being taken in an effort to combat some of the common barriers that my research revealed to be cited by producers when creating television programming. My research also revealed that by including a universal storyline and creating positive relatable African American characters the viewing audience may be more apt to receive and develop a positive perception of African American while being entertained.

By casting and filming the script I will be able to actually bring to life the characters that were once just on paper. The images captured will be much more effective than just creating a script alone. A true production can actually be viewed by an

audience insight given as to how images of African Americans are perceived as well as how stories centered on African American themes are accepted by viewers.

Because the networks are not likely to accept a proposal to pitch what I feel to be the “next big thing,” using the internet to reach an audience is the more practical approach. The production will be streamed online to a website. This will allow a diverse audience to be able to view and comment on what they have seen. Utilizing the web will also help cross barriers that my research revealed to be combative to Black themed productions.

Method

Confessions, the brainchild of Tuane Hearn reflects the thinking of a young, upwardly mobile African American man. This man recognized the need to have a strong African American female shape the concept and experiences of the women portrayed in the storyline. I became the writer, director and co-producer of each webisode. Hearn took on the role of director of photography and the technical assignment of putting each episode on the internet. The story premise is Black-themed and utilizes an African American cast. It employs the help of volunteers to execute all aspects of the production from casting to editing. The final production is then uploaded to a server and streamed online through a web page designed to display the completed production. Emails and text messages are randomly sent announcing the web address of the production. Social networking sites such as *My Space*, *Face Book*, *Black Planet*, and *Twitter* are utilized to advertise the website. To further increase the visibility of the production, episodes are uploaded to *You Tube*.

Broadcast primetime, the time designated between 8:00 pm and 11:00 pm, are the most watched hours of television. Many viewers limit television to their favorite shows. Broadcast programmers now routinely rebroadcast episodes of shows more than once on the same night or three to four times a week. By creating a web-based production viewers can eliminate the time constraint that network programming experiences. Webisodes also have the ability to review programming immediately. This allows individuals the opportunity to gain a clear understanding of dialogue or action that may

have been misunderstood or overlooked. Such elements strengthen a viewer's ability to make a more secure decision as to how they perceive the images portrayed. Viewers will be allowed to leave comments and questions regarding the production online, thereby giving insight into viewer perception of the images and storyline portrayed.

Those who possess leadership roles within the media industry respond best to numbers. The uniqueness of this project could produce the numbers that executives will notice. Viewer comments can provide insight into how the production is perceived on a social and entertainment scale. Rather than rely on network executives' and producers' opinions on what viewers want to see, one can actually hear from those most affected by the images the media creates. This interactive approach can provide direct insight to help build the storyline while examining whether the audience is receptive toward the portrayal of the characters and themes displayed within the production.

The characters in *Confessions* uniquely reflect today's African Americans. The list includes:

Confessions can be found at www.confessions.com. A synopsis of webisodes 1-7 of the production is as follows:

Episode One: *Confessions* opens with William and Shelby meeting with their pastor, but are they ready to tell all?

Episode Two: William and Shelby return home for Sunday dinner with family and friends, Tameka intercepts an unexpected call to Shelby.

Episode Three: It seems like Shelby is not the only one with something to hide as we learn more about Andre' and Janine.

Episode Four: There's a lot to confess when Shelby comes clean to Tameka and Andre meets with Pastor Brown.

Episode Five: Andre and Janine take their relationship to an unexpected place and Shelby tells Tameka the truth.

Episode Six: Tameka's frustration grows as she deals with Shelby's issues and dives deeper into her own struggle. We find out more about what William needs to confess.

Episode Seven: Janine asks Andre' for a favor and Tameka tries to clear her head about the situation with Shelby.

As writer, producer and director of this production I enlisted the help of others to execute the necessary elements needed to create a viable project. A collaborative effort is necessary to complete a production of this scale in a timely manner. Working with a group of individuals not only granted me insight into what network producers actually encounter, it tested my knowledge of theory and application in the field of digital media production and the storytelling process.

The only way to fully understand the dilemma of producing a Black-themed drama that does not alienate those who are not part of that group is to actually produce one. In doing so and encountering the roadblocks and hurdles faced by industry professionals today, I am more apt to give insight on the subject of perception as it relates to people of color. Creating layered characters that are engaging proved difficult when

faced with the task of constructing a common storyline to link each character to the audience. Finding actors that were believable in the role of each character was also a task. Executing a full-scale production on a virtually nonexistent budget required true creativity. Still, after everything was done and the production was complete, getting people to watch is another challenge that creates another set of trials.

Results and Discussion

Research findings seem to suggest that African Americans' "more positive" attitude toward television programming proves that they perceive themselves as being depicted fairly or somewhat accurately within the medium. Yet, one must note that the information is a bit dated. Another question to be asked is what programming are Blacks or people of color choosing to view. Viewer choice plays a vital role in the perception derived from the characters depicted in television programming.

The most difficult part of this project was developing a believable universal story line that was not only entertaining but also truly Black-themed. Creating a functioning production staff and actors to execute the responsibilities of the production was also an intricate task. Identifying the themes to focus upon within the storyline was not as difficult as creating the conflict or drama that a diverse audience could relate to yet remain true to the central theme that the story is centered around. The dialogue between the characters also had to seem authentic or genuine yet relevant to those who are not part of the Black population. Casting believable actors to cover the roles of each character was vital to the success of this project. The actors had to be able to express the emotions set forth in the script but portray the complexities that are prevalent for the working Black professional of today. The production team had to cover every aspect that creating a full scale production entailed. Though I was involved in every aspect of the project there was no way that I could do every job.

I wrote and edited the script after having a team of individuals do a table read and give feedback on the storyline and dialogue. After soliciting the help of a friend an email was sent announcing casting for each character. Casting was then done over a three week process. Though time consuming, this allowed the proper actors to be assigned to each role. The story board and production schedule was then created and dates for shooting were given by scene and location to the actors involved. Over a four month period the production was shot and edited. Volunteers were the ones solicited to help clean up sound and lighting mistakes as well as to make sure editing was done properly. The entire production was then cut into small episodes to be uploaded to the web page developed by a team member. Each step helped to create a better understanding of what producers actually encounter when creating productions for television.

To better understand how this could give insight into viewer perception I had to have a way to see if anyone would watch and to get feedback from viewers. The production itself was uploaded to a web page, which was linked to a popular share site called *Vimeo*. Similar to *You Tube* this site allows you to upload and share footage while receiving viewer statistics and comments on the content seen by viewers who visit the site. The information gained from the statistical information and comments allowed me to see that the storyline was not only entertaining, but engaging to those who watched. Due to the increase in viewership over four weeks I derived that the production was one that viewers would recommend to others. No negative comments were given about the

characters or the storyline. The only negative comments were that viewers wanted to see more each episode.

Through my work I have concluded that a production portraying African Americans within a Black-themed storyline is not far fetched and can be executed without creating images that reinforce negative images of African Americans stereotypically displayed by current television programming. The over use of common themes such as crack cocaine and marijuana use, gang involvement, criminal behavior, obnoxious public behavior, and constant use of slang and dialectical English do not have to be exploited to remain true and relatable to a Black audience. Yet dialogue and character development be done in such a way that mainstream America can not only associate with but identify with as well. The feedback given by viewers suggests that viewer perception is greatly manipulated by the storyline presented within a production. Viewers will continue to watch negative images if the storyline is intriguing. There fore, creating positive images can also be intriguing if they are presented within a good frame work

Final Overview

Viewer perception is directly affected by the media. The images produced do a lot to construct the lasting images individuals develop regarding the world around them and abroad. Ultimately it is the producers of media images and not the consumers who dictate how cultures and ethnic groups are portrayed. Like the child sitting at the dinner table who must eat what is on his plate, the consumer is forced to watch what the networks generate or go hungry for entertainment. If producers fail to employ and or create productions that genuinely portray people of color in engaging positive storylines that display conflict yet do not reinforce overly negative stereotypes; they are adding to what divides society and enhances negative view points. Productions can be created that are entertaining and are not overtly negative all while staying uniquely centered around themes grounded in African American culture.

While this project granted great personal insight into the perception of digital media it was limited by how data and feedback were given by viewers. Not having a way to anonymously ask more detailed info such as race gender, and age prevented a more precise analysis on who was actually watching the production. Such information could have also allowed one to speculate on if any of the previously mentioned played a part into how the images were perceived. No data was collected to establish viewer perception of current prime time or online productions. As a result a comparison of my production to others cannot be done. Because, access to actual network programming was not accomplished this project does not truly test whether viewer perception is any

different when viewing *Confessions* versus other programming shown during primetime. Furthermore, the website did not receive enough hits within the time frame of this project to justify a large enough segment of the population was able to view and comment on the production itself. Of those who did view, some comments received may have been tainted due to the fact that viewers may know me there by skewing their expressed perception.

In the future a survey should be conducted prior to and following viewing of such a production. This will better gauge viewer perception. Viewers should also be asked to voluntarily give demographic information to help give a more precise analysis. More research should be done on current programming and should include more than just the four major networks since more individuals are viewing smaller networks as well. To broaden the reach of the project and to increase site viewership a mass e-mail service may be utilized to send announcements of the project to viewers not associated with the producer affiliated with those involved with the project. Doing so could help provide untainted data to build research findings.

This project was very limited in that sufficient data to access if the production negatively or positively affected viewer perception was not obtained. Also, research pertaining to how recent presidential elections have affected network depiction of minorities was done. However, the project did give insight into how the problems producers face trying to create authentic, non-deprecating programs that entertain. More detailed research is necessary in order to determine the success of such projects with audiences. Still, it adequately approaches the reasons outlined by producers for

continuing to create images that reinforce negative perception. After completing the production I can comfortably say that the problem is solvable by allowing more opportunities for qualified people of color to create productions that are true and honest to their culture, but creatively set within a storyline relevant to a diverse audience. When networks begin to employ more producers, writers, and directors who are actually writing what they know and not what they think people want to see; prime time television may begin to truly reflect modern American society.

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